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THE ROLE OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT SECRETARY IN USDA

Talk by Ralph S. Roberts, Administrative Assistant Secretary,
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In coming before this group to talk about the job of Administrative Assistant Secretary, I experience some of the hesitancy that goes with wearing a new Christmas tie for the first time. Even among old friends, there's a sensation that the tie confers a "new look" which somehow affects established relationships. It is comforting in such circumstances to find that one's friends don't attach the same significance to whatever "new look" the new tie might appear to give. In the role of Administrative Assistant Secretary I find myself with a new job, but working at it with the assistance and cooperation of many people whose support and confidence have helped me in the past.

The title of Administrative Assistant Secretary is new in the Department of Agriculture. It came into being as recently as July 14, 1953, when Mr. Aplin was appointed to the position, pursuant to Reorganization Plan No. 2. I succeeded to the job last September, so that my experience to date spans a period of only four months. Needless to say, those four months have been devoted primarily to special matters or problem areas which demanded attention. The reorganization of November 2, Schedule C problems, new security procedures, study of "Information's" place in USDA, and the FAO Conference have left little time for me to analyze critically my role in the Department.

As a new incumbent of a position new to the Department, I feel that the duties and responsibilities entailed are in the formative stage. It is a challenging opportunity to build from this point toward the potential administrative and management goals which influenced the Hoover Commission to recommend that such a position be established in the Executive Departments of the Government. In the words of the Hoover Commission, an Administrative Assistant Secretary would have ". . . administrative duties of a housekeeping and management nature and . . . give continuity in top management." The Brownlow Commission in 1937 had advocated similarly that there be centered in an executive officer "the authority and responsibility under the direction of the Secretary for the development of administrative management within the Department."

As many of you know, Mr. Jump was among the early advocates of an executive position in the Office of the Secretary, such as we now have in the Administrative Assistant Secretary. He visualized the position as one likely to facilitate long-range planning of administrative objectives, and useful in stabilizing Department operations when changes of administration occurred on the political level. In a letter to the Hon. Daniel W. Bell on January 18, 1940, Mr. Jump said:

". . . The principle of public administration I have in mind is the placement, in each of the large executive establishments, in a position such as Under Secretary or Assistant Secretary, organically subordinate only to the cabinet or political head, of a permanent, non-political career man to provide continuing stability and order in the general operation of the department.

"This has always been a desirable objective, I think, and with the significance which government now has to the daily business and affairs of commerce and industry, other political subdivisions, individual citizens, and so on, it seems to me it is now essential and will be particularly so, I think, when administrations change. By referring to changes in administration, I have in mind not only those periods when one political party superseded another but also the occasions when one chief executive succeeds another, without change in party, and those occasions when a cabinet or other department head is superseded, not only at the time of a change in executive administration but at any other time. All of those who have had long experience in the Federal Service know the extremely disorganizing effect such interludes have on the quality of the public service rendered, by reason of the feeling of instability that affects the morale of the staff for considerable distance down the line and the inertia or confusion that exists, often for a year or two, until all the gears mesh properly again under a new department head. This period of confusion is due partially to the realistic elements of the situation and partially, I think, to the lack of assurance which a new department head feels, and ought to feel, about the job he has to do and the tools he finds at hand with which to do it. The confusion usually continues until sufficient time has elapsed to permit the new political head to become personally familiar with the career personnel of his department and the degree of dependence he may justifiably place upon each of them to carry out the policies of the current administration. Then too, as we all know there is considerable 'fomentation' among the personnel, most of whom are unduly nervous and apprehensive and so on. This disrupts the tone and tempo of the whole organization. You know the whole situation. It is a costly and unnecessary aspect of American public administration.

"I have been looking at this for more than 30 years now and for a good many years I have had the most certain conviction, which is a state of mind somewhat unusual for me, that one of the greatest single contributions any administration could make to stabilizing the quality of public administration in the Federal Service would be to establish in each of the Federal departments one non-political career official with an overall administrative relationship to the to the organization as a whole, and who by common acceptance, both executive and legislative, would be recognized as a permanent non-political Under Secretary (or Assistant Secretary) for continuity of stabilized administration, without regard to policy determination,

which, of course, would continue to be the function of the political cabinet or other head and of other assistant heads who would continue to be appointed and have tenure as at present. The continuing official would be useful in bridging over the whole gap of confusion which now ensues; he would be a rock of dependability for the new cabinet heads who take over from time to time and he would constitute a connecting link between the continuing staff of the Department and its changing general management as political situations shift or as changes occur in departmental heads for other reasons.

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"Of course, the whole success of this idea depends absolutely upon the character, integrity, reputation, and ability of the civil servants who might from time to time be selected for posts of this particular type. They would have to be 'above reproach' on every ground, and particularly so from the standpoint of (a) partisan political activity and (b) their demonstrated ability to maintain the highest tradition of a civil servant in advising the political head and in carrying into effective execution policies that might change from one point of view to another, as the political and economic situation of the country evolves. Please do not misconstrue this as a failure on my part to appreciate the desirability--in fact, the necessity--from the standpoint of guaranteeing that the will of the electorate is reflected in the departments, of maintaining at all times in key positions of similar rank capable individuals who, differing from this particular type of individual, are definitely identified with the political policies of the administration currently in office. My point is that successful public administration requires both types at this level."

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I think I may say from recent experience that there is at a time of changing administrations a genuine and vital need for effective measures to bring about mutual understanding between new policy-makers and those who administer, on a career basis, the continuing programs of the Government. Equally important is the need for ready availability of information, advice and competence to deal with top level administrative problems that inevitably arise in such transitional periods.

The post of Administrative Assistant Secretary provides a focal point for contacts with other Departments and agencies of the Executive Branch on matters of Government-wide and general interest. In the Immediate Office of the Secretary, closer liaison on administrative matters is a natural consequence.

In relation to the several staff offices, there is the obvious function of coordinating to the extent practicable the resources of manpower and

skills devoted to management activities. The Department has long recognized that management is a matter of day-to-day team-play in the utilization of men, money, and materials in the most effective manner. In this objective, program needs have been, and of necessity must be, paramount. Staff services justify themselves by the contribution they make to program accomplishments. I certainly hope that we will not, by increased emphasis on progressive administrative practices, be diverted from the fundamental concept of service to meet program ends or objectives. Assigned functions and responsibilities of the Directors of the several staff offices at the Department level remain unchanged. However, the Secretary's order of August 24, 1953, makes broad delegations of authority that previously were vested in the Secretary. Additional delegations of authority to staff office directors are likely in the future.

Reliance on the staff offices for necessary action in their respective spheres of responsibility is a necessary condition for vigorous executive leadership in the Office of the Secretary where matters of policy, rather than details of operation, should claim the time and attention of the Secretary's aides.

It is too early to outline what may eventually be the shape and form of relations between the Assistant Administrators for Management at the agency level and the Administrative Assistant Secretary at the Department level. Assigned responsibilities are such that a closely-knit type of collaboration and cooperation must be developed. As I review the mechanisms adopted in past years as a means to improved management in the Department I recall the Administrative Council and its accomplishments; I also recall its inherent weaknesses. The Key Management Representatives and the impetus they gave to the Management Improvement and Manpower Utilization Program following its establishment in 1944 are to be commended. I am mindful particularly of the strong support Mr. Jump gave to that management improvement effort in this Department. In our future planning, I don't believe we can afford to ignore the heritage he left as an outstanding practitioner of public administration. He was idealistic; he was imaginative; he was practical; above all, he was an exponent of "responsive" public service.

If we are sensitive to the demands of our particular jobs, sensitive to the policies and objectives of our agencies, sensitive to Congressional expectations and the public welfare, we become management-minded in a real sense and perform our services in the cooperative spirit that has always typified this Department. I comment in this vein because I have less confidence in "glamorized" programs for management improvement, than I do in the conscious cultivation of management thinking and conscientious effort to meet our full responsibility in the work we do. I hope, that in collaboration with the various assistant administrators for management, and with their counterparts in other agencies, we can maintain and strengthen an atmosphere conducive to better management. Methods for making such efforts most effective will have our earnest consideration.

It may be appropriate and of special interest to the O&M Conference if I review briefly one or two highlights in the development of better management concepts in Government. Title X of Public Law 429, 81st Congress, sets forth the statutory responsibility of each department to make systematic reviews of the operations of each of its activities, functions, or organizational units, on a continuing basis. The law provides that

"The purposes of such reviews shall include, among other things,

- (1) determining the degree of efficiency and economy in the operation of the department's activities, functions, or organizational units,
- (2) identifying the units that are outstanding in those respects, and
- (3) identifying the supervisors and employees whose personal efforts have caused their units to be outstanding in efficiency and economy of operations.

Executive Order 10072 of July 29, 1949, reiterated the purposes of the law and emphasized the need for periodic and systematic appraisal of operations and scheduling of action to work out and install improvements.

I think we would all agree that these things are praiseworthy in themselves; but the magnitude of Government activities and the extent of decentralized operations entail many problems of administration. More and more there is need for delegation of authority to lower operating levels to permit decisions to be made in realistic terms at the point where action is needed. That, I assume, is a principle to which we all subscribe. The residual and major problem is how to provide a form of control that gives assurance to the chief executive of an organization that decentralization and delegated authorities do not undermine his position as the administrator responsible for over-all results.

In connection with the current reorganization there is emerging on a rather general basis one answer to this problem, one approach to management appraisal of operations, which we are hopeful will represent a significant advance. I refer to the function of "Program Inspection and Internal Audit." Through a function of this kind, directly responsible to the agency Administrator, systematic and continuing appraisal of agency operations can be undertaken.

The administrator or chief executive of an organization has a variety of management tasks to perform. In these tasks he has the assistance of line officials to conduct actual operations and get the jobs done. To get the jobs done better, he needs the assistance of specialized staff.

An O&M staff is one type of specialty; the internal audit staff is another type of specialty. The development of the internal audit in

general governmental activities has caused concern on the part of some that it represents an intrusion on the prerogatives of O&M work. Others, I am sure, are confused about the inter-relationships. To clarify the differences between these two specialties, the Office of Budget and Finance has developed a comparative analysis on which I should like to draw for the purpose of illustration. In the E&F statement, "Internal Auditing" is defined as "an appraisal activity by an independent staff within an agency for the review of accounting, financial, and other operations as a basis for protective and constructive service to management. It is a type of control which functions by measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of other types of controls within an agency."

By contrast, O&M work "is directed toward the development, revision, and improvement of programs, organization, policies, procedures and methods, in the interests of better management and pursuant to administrative guidance."

The difference between the two might be sharpened up if we think of the internal auditor as reporting deficiencies to the Administrator, while the O&M man undertakes to work out solutions. Viewed in this light, the functions of program inspection and internal audit and that of O&M work are complementary. Through the former, problem areas are identified and brought to the attention of management. Through the latter problem areas are analyzed and appropriate measures for remedial action are developed. Certainly there has not been in our thinking any conflict between these two types of staff activities.

Organizationally, this difference might be noted. Provision has been made for the function of program inspection and internal audit to be carried on at the level of the Administrator, thereby retaining the highest degree of independence and objectivity possible. O&M activities, it is felt, can be most effective in the framework of operations, attached for example to the Assistant Administrator for Management in an agency, thereby affording opportunity for the application of scientific principles of management in constructive efforts to systematize and build organization policies, structure and procedures adequate to the effective discharge of agency responsibilities.

What I have been saying departs, I realize, from the topic you asked me to discuss--namely, The Role of the Administrative Assistant Secretary. It has this relevance, however, that I want you to know that I share with you an interest in organization and management principles and objectives and a desire to contribute toward Department accomplishments in this important field.

As I indicated at the beginning of this rather rambling talk, I consider that my job is in a formative stage. Some of the general outlines I can visualize. Only with the passage of time will there be developed satisfactory operating techniques suited to the position. I ask your indulgence during this period when I possibly may be calling on some of you to help establish a pattern of relationships and activities conducive to making the Department a better place in which to work, and a more efficient service agency responsive to public needs.

